

RECKLESS RALPH'S

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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AN ARTIST RECALLS

NICKEL NOVEL DAYS

By J. Edward Leithead

The best and most prolific artist for the covers of Street & Smith nickel libraries in the colored cover era was Charles L. Wrenn. Over a long period his work appeared as thrilling cover illustrations for their various weeklies, including the Buffalo Bill Stories, New Vick Carter Weekly, Tip Top, Diamond Dick, Jr., Rough Rider, Bowery Boy, Brave and Bold, Might and Main. He also did many covers for New Tip Top, Nick Carter Stories and New Buffalo Bill Weekly, and for Street & Smith's big line of 15 cent novels.

Mr. Wrenn graduated from Princeton in 1903, and at that time was not just sure what he wanted to do. He had been drawing for the Princeton Tiger, and on the advice of a friend, Wilford Conrow, spent the summer of his junior year at the New York Art School, studying under Kenneth Harp Miller and Louis Mora. The summer after graduation he returned to his art studies, but this time entered the Art Student's League.

Here he worked for about six months, then got a job as artist on the Newark Advertiser. It was the first time the paper had had an art department. Unfortunately it lasted only about a year, and Mr. Wrenn and his boss, Dare Cook, started one of the very first Commercial Art Services in Newark, in an old loft building opposite the C. C. R. of N. J. depot. Here they worked for a couple of years. Several evenings each week they conducted an art school in an office. The only member Mr. Wrenn

now recalls was Gus Manger, now a successful cartoonist. The Art Service was eventually discontinued and Mr. Wrenn returned to the League for further study.

Engaged to marry a Miss Helen Bourne, of Cranford, N. J., and being without the necessary funds for marriage, Mr. Wrenn sought employment in the Art Department of Street & Smith, under the art direction of William Heines.

"Here", says Mr. Wrenn, "began my thrilling and blood-curdling adventures with the 5 cent weeklies."

There were two other artists, besides the lettering man. One of the former was Marmaduke Russell, an Englishman who had aspirations to be a portrayer of beautiful women for magazine covers, and spent his in-between moments drawing innumerable handsome English girl heads. It was a complete relaxation from the exciting exploits of Diamond Dick, Buffalo Bill, etc.

The other artist was Ed. Johnson, a heavy-set, handsome fellow who had been a professional pugilist in his earlier days, and then capitalized this knowledge as staff artist on the Police Gazette, doing the fight stuff. Mr. Johnson was a most interesting character, making landscape painting and the violin his hobbies.

"I can still see him sitting at his desk," says Mr. Wrenn, "with several unfinished Buffalo Bill or Nick Carter drawings, fiddling on his arm with a large ruler and completely wrapped in his silent music."

Following Mr. Russell's departure from the department, a Mr. Carter joined their group. Mr. Carter so Mr. Wrenn believes, is still

with Street & Smith doing covers and sport headings for their magazines.

Mr. Illers was the lettering man, hammering out the thrilling titles for many years, when he was succeeded by a Mr. James, a young artist friend of Mr. Wrenn's from Arizona. Mr. James did the usual titles, besides headings for other Street & Smith magazines, Popular, etc. He was made Art Director of Street & Smith, following the death of Mr. Heines.

Mr. Heines, the art director, used to hand Mr. Wrenn and his associates mss. for Buffalo Bill, Nick Carter, the Merriwells, Bowery Boy, etc. which they would skim through, or if they became interested in the story (as they often did) read to a finish, thus getting behind schedule; pick out a thrilling scene, sketch it roughly, show it to Mr. Heines then go to work on the drawing. Sometimes under pressure they were given a short typed synopsis of a scene. Most of them turned out from four to six of these drawings each week. The drawings were done in pen and ink, the proof then colored by the artists, and sent in to the Ben Day color department, where the Jacobus brothers made the color plates. Each week a large proof sheet was brought to Mr. Wrenn and his associates for their inspection and criticism. The heads of the organization took these 5 cent novels very seriously, as at that time they were great money makers.

"I recall one incident", Mr. Wrenn says amusingly, "which almost wrecked my career. I had informed Mr. Heines that I was to be married in the following October, two months off, when a sheet of Buffalo Bill covers was brought in. The whole firm were in a great stew. In coloring one of the proofs I had made an unpardonable error. The scene was Buffalo Bill clinging to the limb of a tree at the edge of a precipice, with a huge man-spider blocking Cody's chance to save himself from the yawning abyss.

"The title of the story was 'Buffalo Bill and the Creeping Terror'; or, The Black Spider of the Shoshones'. And I had painted the spider yellow! Mr. Heines and Messrs. George and Ormond Smith, the big bosses, were in a state. The magazines were on the press. Presses stopped, the color department puzzling how to turn yellow to black. I was about to be fired, my job and marriage about to go up

in yellow smoke. Then the Jacobus Brothers hit on a method of turning the yellow into near-black by applying green. All was saved and I am still married to Helen Bourne.

"Mr. Gilbert Patten (Burt L. Standish) was then my great admiration. He wrote the Merriwell stories, and with my college background, I took great interest in doing my best with these heroes. Mr. Patten and I still see each other over a glass at Lee Chumley's in the village, and go over those early days."

EDITORIAL

I had planned to have a Birthday and Dedication, number all in one, but my hopes have gone haywire, as Mr. Benners is so sick now that its impossible for me to be able to get it out just now and besides there isn't as many ads as I thought there would be, but will run them in the Round-up, and if I do have a chance to bring out this special number, and a few more ads came in, then I'll see what I can do for you. I suppose you all think I'm a bluffer, and it begins to look that way, I know, and I'm slaving getting out the Round-up, but it wont always be like this, with Mr. Benners (Uncle Billie's) recovery every one will get their paper on time, and I'll do my part to perfection. No doubt many of you would like to give me something in spring medicine, thinking it would wake me up. I wonder? Your friend as always. Some day a surprise awaits.

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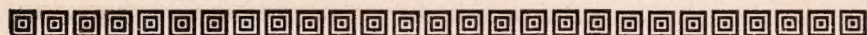
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